World Chronicle

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UNRWA

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UNRWA

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is one of the largest United Nations programmes in the Middle East. UNRWA provides basic social services to the 3.6 million Palestine refugees registered with the Agency in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In this episode of **World Chronicle,** Peter Hansen, UNRWA Commissioner-General, looks back at the Agency's fifty years history and its contribution to the welfare and human development of four generations of Palestine refugees.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, was established by the UN General Assembly in December 1949. Its task is to carry out direct relief and works programmes for Palestine refugees following the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. Originally envisaged as a temporary organization, the Agency has gradually adjusted its programmes to meet the changing needs of the refugees. Today, UNRWA is the main provider of basic services -- education, health, relief and social services -- to over 3.6 million registered Palestine refugees in the Middle East.

Our guest today is UNRWA Commissioner-General, Peter Hansen. Joining me to talk with Mr. Hansen are Mohamed Atta Saad from the *Voice of America* and Tuyet Nguyen of the *German Press Agency/DPA*.

Mr. Hansen, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

HANSEN: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Commissioner-General, in the introduction, we spoke about work programmes. What are work programmes? Are you guys employing refugees and what sort of work are they doing?

HANSEN: We are indeed employing quite a number of refugees but works as it appears in our name shows about a bit our age because that is a term that goes back half a century to denote what today is called development. And works was a capital intensive set of programmes that UNRWA was supposed to be doing when it was first set up. But UNRWA never became a major capital investor in physical capital, but it has very much become a major investor in human capital for the education and health of all the refugee population.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are there actual refugee industries? I mean these refugees are working on things like computers and other artists and all activity?

HANSEN: Well, we are very much been in the forefront of trying to introduce modern skills and we have computer training for the refugees partly now in our schools but also in our vocational training centres and when you talk about artists and all skills in -- a few weeks ago, we received the first prize in the Arab Gulf Fund for Development Activities as the best and both innovative development project for 1999 which was UNRWA's micro-

financed programme which are enabling thousands of refugees to start up small businesses, small trade centres, etc., and we are delighted in fact private capital providers for such activities in Gaza where the capital base is now over 30 million dollars.

LITTLEJOHNS: The temporary, unfortunately, is often the most permanent and as we also said in the introduction, nobody ever thought that your Agency would be around 50 years after it began and of course you're celebrating your golden jubilee, so to speak, although perhaps it's not too much calls for celebration through May, I believe. Your cause have had all along financial problems. How does it look now?

HANSEN: Yes, we have had and let me emphasize what you emphasized and this is no reason for celebration. On the contrary, fifty years – four generations of refugees living under the circumstances that they do – is an occasion for reflection about how this could happen and what should be done in order to bring an end to this human misery that the refugees are undergoing. Budget problems – we've had ever since the Organization started. In fact the very first report of the very first hit on UNRWA was saying 'how can you run an organization with uncertain income from voluntary contributions delivered at uncertain times that you can never predict and that has really been a very, very big hindrance for the agency not having the resources made available to us that the General Assembly decides we need in the budget and then we can go out and try to find the money and we virtually never find the money that is necessary to make ends meet.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are all contributions are voluntary?

HANSEN: All contributions are voluntary with the exception of the International Post in UNRWA which are very, very few and very small. We are a huge agency in the sense that we have more than 22,000 employees but we only have a hundred international staff or even a little less than a hundred.

SAAD: As a follow-up, how did it go in the pledging conference concerning the contribution? We all know that Japan has been the highest contributor before. How did it go today?

HANSEN: Well Japan is a good and much appreciated contributor to the Agency but it is actually far from the largest contributor. The largest contributor to UNRWA is the United States which put a pledge an amount of 80 million dollars which is very significant. There is a bit competition about who is the largest because the Europeans are saying that collectively, we are the largest, when they add up their individual contributions and those of

the European Union but it is between the European Union, the US as the largest single contributor, and Japan as the third largest in absolute terms.

SAAD: So even with these contributions, you're going to face shortages?

HANSEN: We are going to face shortages as of the last month in this century. We don't quite see how we can meet the payroll for these last months and I hope that eventually a package will be stitched together so we can but we're always operating on a shoestring.

NGUYEN: Mr. Hansen, what would it take for the 3.6 million refugees to return to their place of origin? We cannot imagine that your Organization is going to last another fifty years, you know, not being able in the last fifty years to really settle all the refugees.

HANSEN: Well, it has never been UNRWA's task to settle the refugees. It has been UNRWA's task to provide services for them until, as the formula goes, just fair and lasting solution to the refugee problem has been found and now in the current negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian authority and indeed on other tracks, one of the major final status issues would be the solution to the refugee problem. I agree with you. Let's not think of another fifty years of this. We have four generations already – can you imagine down to the eighth or tenth generation of refugees? Unthinkable.

NGUYEN: But does the UN have a position in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and other Arab countries?

HANSEN: A number of resolutions have been adopted by the UN and by the General Assembly and they would assume a significance for the UN as a policy framework but on the other hand, it is very clear that this is a negotiation between the parties and when it comes to the positions of the parties, that is, to put it mildly, a considerable difference between how Israel foresees this and how the Palestinian authority and the host countries foresee the future and the fate of the refugees.

SAAD: On this occasion, how much do you feel the Agency has changed the life of the Palestinians over these fifty years?

HANSEN: It's very difficult to speculate about what if situations. What if UNRWA had not been created or nothing had been created in its place? What if then there would not have been tents to house them in the beginning, there would not have been schools to educate them, there would not be health programmes to attend to their health needs. What has happened is that thanks to UNRWA and thanks to an outstanding education programme, the refugees are actually the best educated group in the region as measured by

standardized scores in national exams ..

LITTLEJOHNS: That's quite an achievement.

HANSEN: It is quite an achievement ... quite an achievement. Extraordinary when you consider that they started out teaching in tents and when you consider that we have all of $70 per refugee per year to take care of education, health, relief and welfare. Try to think of any other society where such quality programmes have been delivered for that little money. On the health sector, UNRWA has already achieved, years before the year 2000, the target set by the World Health Organization and UNRWA has made great strides in combatting a number of diseases, in bringing down child mortality and indeed ensuring that despite all the burdens on the refugee community in often unsanitary camps that the health of the population is actually as good as it is. So there's a vast gulf between what could have been the case if there had been no international response to the plight of the refugees and what UNRWA has actually achieved over the years.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, what you just said is the up side but I gather that in Lebanon, the refugees there are in rather bad shape. Why is their situation so different from the others?

HANSEN: They are indeed in very bad shape and for all the achievements that UNRWA has reached, there is no need for complacency, I mean, we should not be satisfied. We are dealing with human destinies that consists of much more than school and health. But in Lebanon that you referred to, indeed the situation is very, very difficult for the refugees, because the Lebanese have made it very, very clear that the refugees are not welcome in Lebanon.

LITTLEJOHNS: How many are there?

HANSEN: There's about 350,000. But in Lebanon, in particular, it is very difficult to make a very definite and precise count, because many refugees have felt forced to migrate to Europe in search of work that they cannot obtain in Lebanon and therefore we are not always sure exactly what the number of refugees left in Lebanon. But it's between 300 and 350,000.

LITTLEJOHNS: What kind of travel documents do they have?

HANSEN: Well, they have their Palestinian travel papers which are not recognized by many. Some of them have passports but ....

LITTLEJOHNS: They're recognized by European Governments?

HANSEN: Not really. Not to any large extent, I mean, that's good enough.

LITTLEJOHNS: Because you mentioned that some have gone from Lebanon to Europe.

HANSEN: Yes, indeed, indeed. But many of them have also, upon arrival in Europe, been sent back to Lebanon where they're not always welcomed back by the Lebanese authorities. They indeed live in a very, very exposed and a very, very difficult situation where they are almost totally dependent on UNRWA since they are already admitted in menial jobs in the Lebanese economy.

SAAD: You did not negotiate a settlement with the government or anything? You did not try at least ....

HANSEN: The refugees do not want to be settled in Lebanon and the Lebanese do not want them to settle there. So it is, from their perspective, a very temporary situation even though that has lasted for close to fifty years.

NGUYEN: In general you know, you are talking about 3.6 million refugees. How do they make a living to support the family. Let's say, a head of the family living in a refugee camp How do they survive except for, sure education, welfare and social helps through the UN – how do they make a living to support the family?

HANSEN: Well, you'll be surprised if you look at the statistics of refugees who, over the years, have found gainful employment and many of them in the gulf countries where they were very key participants in the building up of these economies and societies in the years until the Gulf War in 1991. They have had difficulties in being accepted in the Gulf after the Gulf War. But there are still many there who send money back to the family. There are several, in Gaza particularly, who are dependent on access to the Israeli labour market to work there. In a country like Jordan, where they have been given pretty much full citizenship rights – they have indeed full citizenship rights – where they can work in the local markets. But, as I said, the situation is very, very difficult and they do need the help they're getting from UNRWA.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is UNRWA Commissioner-General, Peter Hansen.

Mr. Hansen, the previous Israel Government was not very cooperative in some areas with UNRWA. There of course being the change of government. Is the new administration a bit easier to get along with?

HANSEN: Well, I must say that even though we have our differences with the Israeli administration they have, as of late, taken significant steps to ease our approbations in the area, not yet to my full satisfaction, but certainly Israel is also demonstrating that it is in everybody's interest that the suffering of the refugees is reduced to the minimum possible.

NGUYEN: Mr. Hansen, is the Palestinian authority prepared to take those refugees?

HANSEN. Well, many of the refugees, in fact about 40 percent of the refugees live in Gaza and the West Bank. About 60 percent of them live in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. So about -- what is it -- about 1.6 million of their abouts live in Gaza and the West Bank within the territories where there is a partial Palestinian autonomy. But the Palestinian authority is not ready to takeover responsibility for the refugees. Naturally, I assume because they do not want to relieve, as it were, the International Community from the responsibility that they feel very strongly rests on the International Community until a negotiated solution has been found with Israel.

NGUYEN: If those refugees are already living in the Gaza Strip in the West Bank, I guess they belong there. So when you talk about resettling those refugees, where would they go?

HANSEN: Well, I am not talking about resettling them. And I'm not even talking about them belonging there because many of these refugees came to Gaza from elsewhere and then considered themselves Gazans. They identify themselves with whichever village or part of the former Palestine they came from. So we're not into the resettlement business and we have to stir very clear of getting involved in any of these issues that would become so politicized that it would be very difficult for the agency to function.

SAAD: That leads to another question: what kind of cooperation do you get from the Palestinian Authority?

HANSEN: We get housing and authority....

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean Palestine Authority?

HANSEN: Yes, Palestine authority. We get good cooperation. We work with them on a daily basis. We harmonize medical procedures and protocols. We harmonize with the relief and we give to refugees and they give to poor Gazans who do not have refugee status and we have a close collaboration with them but of course I would not hide the fact that we also can have our differences with the Palestinian authority on issues as we

can with all of the host countries. But basically, we have very good cooperation with the host countries and host authorities.

NGUYEN: Mr. Hansen, it has been speculated that your Agency has to be dismantled in order to really, you know, put an end to the programme and the refugee situation. Do you believe this is something that could happen?

HANSEN: I'm all for the abolition of UNRWA when the conditions are ready for it and that is when an agreed solution has been found. But that must be the order of sequence. Not to do away with UNRWA in order to do away with the refugee issue, but to do away with UNRWA once the refugee issue has been settled. That must be the order of sequence.

SAAD: What s the feeling among the refugees themselves?

HANSEN: Well, it is very difficult if you have been a refugee in the fourth generation to be very upbeat about returning or getting your problem solved tomorrow. A certain weariness and a certain cynicism is something that you will hardly be surprised of finding in that population.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, what about population growth? We've spoken about 3.6 million refugees. Are they adding to that population by a percentage of what – 3-4 percent of whatever?

HANSEN: Even more than that. In Gaza, you have the highest population growth in the world. Oman is at around that, too, but Oman does not have the return that you have seen through Gaza. So Gaza is the fastest exploding human group in the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: Percentage wise, what's that?

HANSEN: About 6 percent or so a year – about 5-6 percent – that's very, very rapid. When you look at Gaza, a small strip of 40 kilometres by 6 or 7 kilometres where there were about 20,000 people at the time of the first World War, today is home to over a million with a very, very high population density and if you can imagine one of our camps close to where our offices are, you got 72,000 people living on 0.5 square kilometres and I am not talking Tokyo or Manhattan high rises, I'm talking low shelters for people ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Tents?

HANSEN: No, they are now in concrete block shelters with tin roofs, and so on, very primitive but tents were replaced by other shelters in the 1960's,

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you have a family planning programme?

HANSEN: We have a family planning programme and we have, in fact, pioneered that to a degree that it is now increasingly accepted. Family planning is not something that comes easy or natural in a culturally conservative environment like Gaza but we now can establish a clear coalition between acceptors of family planning devices and the number of children being born. We don't talk about it in terms of reducing the population. We talk about it in terms of spacing the children for the sake of the health of the mothers and for the general family health.

SAAD: Mr. Hansen, do you feel that moving the agency into the area itself has benefitted the refugees more than before?

HANSEN: It's difficult to say whether it has benefitted the refugees more than before. I think on balance it has been a good thing to bring us into the area but many think that we were brought there in order to be the first step in the dissolution of UNRWA and handing over to the authorities.

LITTLEJOHNS: But where were you before?

HANSEN: We were in Vienna – headquartered in Vienna.

LITTLEJOHNS: When did you move from Vienna to ....?

HANSEN: We moved from Vienna to Gaza and Amman in July 1996. But I should say originally the headquarter was in Beirut from where it had to leave because of the civil war and civil strife in Beirut. Then it had to leave for Vienna and now it has come back to the region in Gaza.

NGUYEN: Mr. Hansen, when the programme started fifty years ago, do you remember how many refugees you had then and the growth of the number of refugees in the past fifty years? And what is your projections in, you know, the next few years?

HANSEN: Well, I wouldn't say that I remember because even though I was around then, I was not very focussed on this problem. But I do know that the number of refugees registered in '48-'49 was about 700 thousand. So we're talking about a of the population from the regional refugee population. So the refugees now are the descendants most of them of the people who originally fled.

NGUYEN: And so they are stateless people.

HANSEN: They are stateless except for those, for instance in Jordan, who can get Jordanian papers.

NGUYEN: But in the last few wars between Israel and other Arab countries, have

the number of refugees added to the original number?

HANSEN: Well, these are refugees who were first refugees fleeing from present-day Israel within seven boundaries into the West Bank and they were made refugees twice as were others who were, once again, have their lives interrupted by the war and had to flee once more, many of them to Jordan, most of them to Jordan.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United States has been leading on Secretary-General Kofi Annan to have a zero growth budget which to a great extent he succeeded in doing. I think that your budget is actually – had to move up a bit. Why is that?

HANSEN: Well, we are faced with an annual population growth. We have every year in Gaza another additional 11,000 children that we have to put into schools and when you are already cramming 50-55 children into small rooms in the school, there are just limits how many you can shove in there so we do have need for expanding the number of schools, we do have to have more teachers but ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Health services, too.

HANSEN: Health services – we have about 7 million patient visits per year and our doctors in our health centres receive over a hundred – 110 -120 patients per day, so you can imagine that ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Per doctor, per day?

HANSEN: Per doctor, per day .... so we cannot simply say zero growth. But UNRWA is not part of the UN project which is what Mr. Annan has endeavoured to keep at zero percent growth. We get our resources mainly from – almost exclusively – from voluntary contributions and these contributions have tended to increase slightly which is rather remarkable when you think of how overall multilateral aid has been going and how many agencies have suffered from direct declines.

SAAD: How much do you pay a refugee who works with the Agency?

HANSEN: We do not pay what I would like us to pay. The more UN agencies, that had moved to the region, they pay according to different pay scale than we do. They pay according to the best availing local circumstances and we pay about half or third of what other UN agencies can pay their local areas to have. We pay about the same as the local public organizations do in the area and that is very, very modest.

SAAD: And he still gets the other benefits? I mean, he can live with this pay and other benefits he gets from you.

HANSEN: Well, some of our lowest paid staff are actually sort of below the poverty line, if you will. We simply don't have the money to meet the demands of our staff and as you can imagine, if you have 22,000 staff who feel quite underpaid, industrial relations is quite a big part of my job.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, we have got about half a minute left. If we ask you about AIDS, do you have an AIDS problem in the camps?

HANSEN: There is really not much of an AIDS problem in the camp and I think that has very much to do with the quite conservative ethos you have in the relation between the sexes in that part of the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: Very little promiscuity, no sharing drug needles and stuff like that.

HANSEN: Very little. There has, of late, began to come some drug-related problems in parts of our refugee camps but it is still, fortunately, one of the areas where we are far behind others in the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been UNRWA Commissioner-General, Peter Hansen. He was interviewed by Mohamed Attia Saad from the *Voice of America* and Tuyet Nguyen of the *German Press Agency/DPA*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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